

Testimony of Ellen Stern Harris Executive Director of The Fund of the Environment

**Submitted for the 2/26/03 Public Workshop of the DWR / SWRCB / DHS 2002
Recycled Water Task Force and The Environmental Justice Coalition for Water**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

The Fund for the Environment fully endorses the appropriate reuse of water extracted from sewage, properly treated, and continuously monitored.

As part of this process, fail-safe systems must be required, including back-up generators and sufficient storage capacity to deal with electrical outages and protracted storm conditions.

We support this form of recycled water use and its transport, in separate piping, as has been done for decades at Irvine Ranch and elsewhere. This is properly utilized in industrial cooling applications, on freeway landscapes, golf courses and for certain crops.

However, we specifically and strongly oppose tertiary treated water, from sewage, being inserted into our potable water supplies.

Our existing, available, groundwater is not just threatened, it is increasingly polluted. A quarter of the wells in the San Gabriel Valley are contaminated by industrial solvents. Santa Monica has had to close many of its wells, due to the infiltration of MBTE.

The State has ordered Chevron to truck in water to Cambria to compensate for its MTBE pollution of that community's water. There will be further disclosures of this type, as plumes of such toxins move toward and into other wells. And Orange County has closed down wells contaminated by a by-product of chlorine: NDMA.

In water, quality definitely matters. I speak from experience.

I have served on the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board and on the board of directors of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. The Fund for the Environment's Science and Medical advisor, Dr. Harvey S. Frey, M.D., Ph.D., and I have also met with the top lab people at L.A. County Sanitation Districts' pioneer water reclamation plant, at Whittier Narrows.

This was when a facility to insert reclaimed sewage effluent into an aquifer was being proposed by the Upper San Gabriel Municipal Water District.

Dr. Frey, a Cal Tech grad, came away from this meeting and said that the lab's techniques and methodologies were then 30 years behind the times. I so testified in court, when Miller Brewery sued to stop the USGMWD's plans.

Miller ended up settling its suit. It will continue to be extracting its water from a source which will not include any of the treated effluent. I hope that Anheuser-Busch will similarly consider the possible adverse effects of this kind of water on its product, if the East Valley facility of LADWP is ever approved for that area.

The USGMWD also agreed to scale down its plans to a demonstration project. But this demonstration project is still not on line, so we have not had the benefit of lessons it might provide.

The testing protocols must be made far more stringent than at present. It is the CA. Dept. of Health Services and the L.A. Regional Water Quality Control Board which are responsible for setting such inadequate standards and requiring inadequate monitoring and inadequate back-up provisions.

I believe that we can also expect inadequate enforcement. When the alarm rings, we wonder whether anyone will be anywhere nearby to respond timely and effectively.

I knew Don Tillman, before the East Valley LADWP facility bearing his name was built. I supported its being built. But, that was with the clear understanding that its output was not to be co-mingled with potable supplies. I believe that what is now proposed for the E. Valley is a betrayal of the public trust, and of Don Tillman's intent.

What is driving this seemingly well intentioned, if misguided push for ever-more water extraction from sewage? I believe it is, in part, to meet the recent requirement of a 20-year supply of water having to be secured before large developments may be given a construction permit.

And it is undoubtedly being pushed to help save the Delta in Northern California, from which we in Southern California import so much of our water. It may also be to help save Mono Lake, a laudable goal. And it is undoubtedly to help comply with California's obligation to reduce our take from the Colorado River.

However, with more and more treatment-resistant bacteria and viruses, our society's health considerations should be paramount. The very young and the aged and others need our protection. That's because their undeveloped or impaired immune systems may not be able to fend off water-borne disease from questionable supplies.

There are far better places to get the drinking water we need than from sewage: Consider please, that as much as 85% of California's water is used by agriculture. Only about 5% of the State's water is used domestically. And yet, residential consumers are required to do 100% of the conserving.

It's time that corporate agriculture assumed its share of responsibility. We might even get the legislature to offer them low-cost loans for improved irrigation systems. We should also get Congress and our Legislature to make our drinking water standards far more stringent than at present.

Jeopardizing our citizens' health and our aquifers with an inferior quality of water is not the way to go. Insisting on inserting such an inappropriate product into our potable water supplies will mean that only the well-to-do will feel any sense of safety, when drinking or bathing with this reclaimed effluent. It is they who will install reverse osmosis systems in their homes and rely upon bottled water for drinking and cooking.

This administration's claim that it is concerned with environmental justice rings hollow if you, as a task force, proceed to recommend adoption of recycled effluent being added to our aquifers. Your ignoring the precautionary principle is done at our peril and yours.

Involuntary exposure to such degraded supplies, whether for drinking or absorption through bathing, will evidence further discrimination against the working poor and even lower middle-income families.

We urge you to reconsider this rush to what appears to be a very regrettable course of action.

Respectfully submitted,

Ellen Stern Harris